

## Russia's Strategy in Practice: the Case of Latvia

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After Russia's actions in Crimea and Eastern Ukraine, it became almost a consensus among think-tankers, policymakers, and some scholars that the next Russian military action would happen in the Baltics. The underlying presupposition is that, first, the Russian President Vladimir Putin wants to recreate the Soviet Union; second, that invading and annexing the Baltic States is one of the necessary steps for achieving this objective; third, that the Russian speaking population could be easily used to support subversive operations in a Crimea like scenario. At the operational level, this was to be done by employing supposed Russian Hybrid Warfare tactics, which would be based on the alleged Gerasimov Doctrine. A serious problem with this assumption is that it projects falsified strategic objectives and military instruments to be employed by Russia which are based on a narrative created by the West. The Russian strategic considerations and military concepts differ from the Western conceptualization.

It is not the case to say that Russia has no interest in the Baltic Countries. On the contrary. The Baltic Countries are constantly under non-kinetic attack by non-military and military instruments. Among these are psychological, information, and influence operations, including by financing pseudo Non-Governmental Organizations for achieving political goals, disinformation campaigns, and strong military posturing near the Baltic Countries' borders. Nevertheless, there is no sign that Russia would engage, at least at this moment, in a Crimea-like operation to annex the Baltic States. The Russian strategy for the Baltic States is multilayered and chiefly determined by the Baltic States being considered part of the West. Therefore, as part of the Russian grand strategy towards the West.

The independence of the Baltic Countries resulted in Russia losing strategic depth as NATO's border is now just 160 km from Saint Petersburg. Third, the significant Russian-speaking population in Estonia and Latvia. Although Russia does not consider the Baltic Countries part of the Russian World (*Russkiy Mir*) the same does not apply to their Russian speaking population. Russia has the obligation to protect the interests and the preservation of the Russian national cultural identity of the Russian compatriots abroad.<sup>1</sup> There is also the view of possibly using the Russian-speaking population as an instrument for political pressure and as part of destabilization and influence operations.

This enters into direct conflict with the process of Westernization faced by the Russian speaking population in the Baltic Countries, which reduces Russia's leverage in the region. There is no evidence that they would support Russian activities resulting in becoming under Moscow's rule. Finally, the Baltic theater represents an operational challenge. A direct

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<sup>1</sup> Kremlin, Podpisan Zakon o popravke k Konstitutsii Rossiyskoy Federatsii (The Law on Amendments to the Constitution of the Russian Federation was Signed), Kremlin.ru, March 14 2020, available in <http://kremlin.ru/acts/news/62988>.

intervention would face strong resistance from the local population with great chance of transitioning into years of guerrilla warfare.

Taking the above into consideration, four questions arise. What is the Baltic Countries' place in Russia's grand strategy? What are Russia's specific strategic objectives for the region? What instruments does Russia might employ to achieve such objectives? How are they being operationalized? What are the results? This article aims to answer these questions. First, by analyzing Russia's general strategic objectives. Second, by reviewing the Baltic region's historical place on the Russian strategy. Third, by exploring Russia's current strategic objective towards the region. Fourth, by examining the actions taken by Russia to achieve these objectives.

It is possible to develop a fourfold argument. The first is that Russia considers itself a victim of Western grand power interests. Its grand strategy is directed to avoid its collapse and to establish a multipolar world to strengthen its resilience against other powers. Also, that the strategic objective towards the Baltic States is non-military. The possibility of a military intervention exists but the risk is low. These countries are NATO and EU members. Therefore, the costs associated with a military intervention are too high. Rather, the objective is to gain political and economic influence by non-military means. As a result, the internal fragilities of the Baltic Countries as a result of their own political choices determine the Russian strategy's success or failure. Therefore, besides military deterrence, political and social policies to reduce the gap between society and the State is of fundamental significance.

Russia's strategic goal in the Baltic States is to stimulate a process described in the literature as finlandization. It can be achieved by kinetic or non-kinetic means, although a combination is also possible. In the case of the Baltic States, Russia has chosen non-kinetic means until now. This is mostly the result of NATO reassurance and deterrence actions as the Baltic States' development of new defense capabilities as well. Therefore, one should not underestimate the relevance of military deterrence in the region.

An important point to be taken into consideration is that the operationalization of non-kinetic warfare, especially information, psychological, and influence operations depends very much on the opponent's idiosyncratic fragilities. As a result, deterrence has to be mostly by denial. This means that it surpasses the mandate of the military and belongs mostly to the political realm.

The Russian influence operations in Latvia have been following the methods and points discussed in the Russian military literature. Nevertheless, their success is low. Russia has been unable to exploit economic interests as a result of the orientation of the Latvian economy to the West. The fact that joining the European Union, NATO and, more recently, the OECD was among the most important objectives of the Latvian foreign policy resulted in the internal political actors having to adapt their interests, reducing Russia's economic and political leverage.

The political operations carried out by Russian agents of influence mostly failed, with the exception of the morality initiative. Diplomatic and information operations have been limited, therefore their effect has been also limited. There is a natural suspicion of the

population about Russia's intentions. At the same time, Russia has been unable to present itself as an attractive and viable alternative for the West.

This article is primarily, but not solely, based on Russian and Latvian primary sources - leadership speeches, and professional diplomatic and military periodicals. Besides speeches and statements from Russian authorities, it predominantly relies on original articles from the journal *International Affairs (Mezhdunarodnoy zhizni)*. It is the chief publication of the Russian Ministry of Foreign Affairs, and the main forum for active and retired diplomats, and foreign affairs intellectuals to discuss the most important issues of foreign policy. Since it is not limited for internal consumption, it is fair to consider that it reflects the main debates and the acceptable views and narratives of the Russian Ministry of Foreign Affairs.